

Conceptual Outline

VIETNAM: THEATER OF STRUGGLE

by George A. Carver, Jr.

SETTING

A succinct sketch of the historical origins of the Vietnamese people, their resultant cultural outlook, value system, political concepts and patterns of political behavior. This section would limn in the impact of their eighteen-century long migration out of the Red River Delta over the territory now called "Vietnam," the import of their north-south political split early in the 17th century at about the 17th Parallel (with the result that most of what we call South Vietnam was conquered, colonized and settled by Vietnamese owing no political allegiance to the rulers in Hanoi), the role of Buddhism, the after-effects of Chinese suzerainty, the significance of the way the French came to Vietnam and the cultural and political consequences of the French system of colonial administration.

PROLOGUE

This section would trace the rise of modern Vietnamese nationalism in the period from the end of the First World War to the beginning of the Second, including the role of Nguyen Ai Quoc (better known by his other, later alias of Ho Chi Minh) and the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party, the non-Communist revolutionary movements, and the way the French fought them all, often by playing these various Vietnamese movements off against each other, and the conceptual consequences of modern Vietnamese nationalism's being rooted in the politics of conspiracy.

ACT I - THE SECOND WORLD WAR: 1940-1946

This section would cover the six critical years from 1940 (when metropolitan France collapsed and the Japanese moved into Indochina) to 1946, showing how the way that war was waged in this subsidiary theater and, particularly, the way in which it ended set the stage for much that was to follow in Indochina.

ACT II - THE FRANCO-VIET ~~MINH~~ WAR: 1946-1954

This section would be a succinct survey of the Franco-Viet Minh struggle, not a recapitulation of its complicated history but a tracing of the outlook it bred among politically conscious Vietnamese and of its political consequences and effects -- including the legacies and lacunae of the 1954 Geneva Accords -- which set the parameters for the ensuing two decades of struggle in Vietnam.

ENTRE-ACTE - THE POLITICAL STRUGGLE INTERLUDE: 1954-1957

This section would cover the three critical years of post-Geneva political struggle which -- in a way that was almost literally incredible -- Diem won and the Communists lost. The accretion of polemical mythology that has come to envelop this crucial period is thick, but what happened afterward cannot be understood unless and until it is peeled away. Diem's selection was not the devious plot of reactionary American cardinals but a prank motivated by a malice that was quintessentially French. Diem had long been an irritant (or, to be blunt, pain in the ass) to both the French and the Communists, both of whom would have liked to see him dead. Hence, the French saw in Diem the perfect patsy to hold the bag while the Communists took over.

The way the course of actual events in Vietnam during these three years confounded the expectations of all knowledgeable observers, across the entire political spectrum, constitutes a salutary lesson for any who would attempt to predict the future in this complex area. Diem's early political successes owed very little to American aid (which was slight) and almost nothing to American advice (which he generally ignored). The man whom Diem defeated in the political arena was Le Duan,

then running the Party's southern organization, now its First Secretary in Hanoi and (since Ho's death) first among his Politburo equals. What happened to Le Duan in 1954-1957 has had a profound and lasting impact on his outlook and, hence, great influence over Hanoi's whole subsequent behavior, its negotiating strategy and its current policies.

ACT III - ARMED STRUGGLE RESUMED: 1957 ONWARD

SCENE I: 1957-1960

This section would cover the cresting of Diem's political high-water mark, the accretion of rural grievances, the rise of the insurgency which battered on them, the Communist Party's May 1969 Plenum, events in Laos which made possible a reopening of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Party's September 1960 Third Congress, the organization of the NLF and the attempted coup in Saigon of November 1960. This last event, now almost forgotten, came within a whisker of succeeding and was actually one of the most critical watersheds in recent Vietnamese history.

SCENE II: 1961-November 1963

This section would cover the changing nature of the struggle, Diem's downhill slide, the quantum increase in American participation directed by President Kennedy, and the turbulence leading to the coup which finally overthrew Diem. This is another critical period now much distorted by the crust of mythology. Actually, the steps that Kennedy directed had a considerable initial impact which might have proved lasting had it not been for the burgeoning stresses and strife within the non-Communist portions of the political spectrum, culminating in Diem's overthrow.

SCENE III: November 1963-May 1965

This would cover the inevitable post-Diem shakeout and the kaleidoscopic series of governments it produced, Hanoi's December 1963 decisions, the changing pattern of military activity, the Communists' attempt to score a quick victory, the evolving pattern of American participation, the first air strikes against North Vietnam and the initial introduction of U.S. ground combat forces.

SCENE IV: May 1965-December 1967

This would cover the progressive emergence of a GVN with a capacity to govern, the inter-relationship between Ky and Thieu, the changes therein which led to Thieu's predominance and (eventually) unrivaled primacy, the buildup of American ground forces, their use and impact, the air war and its politico-military consequences, Hanoi's strategy both within Indochina and abroad, the transmutation of insurgency into essentially conventional warfare, the evolution and changes in the situation in the countryside and among the rural population, the impact and lessons of the 1967 elections in Vietnam, and the time lag (on both sides of the struggle) between perception and reality.

SCENE V: 1968 and 1969

This would cover the series of major Communist offensives (Tet, May, August 1968 and February 1969) and the significance of their differing patterns, the impact and consequences of these offensives within Vietnam, their radically different impact within the United States, President Johnson's February-March 1968 decisions and their consequences, the bombing cutback and the opening of negotiations, the U.S. Presidential election, the drive to talks in Paris, Thieu's role and position, and the inter-relationship of all of these elements, President Nixon and the policy of Vietnamization, the course of events in rural South Vietnam, Communist misperceptions related thereto and their consequences, the changing balance of political power within South Vietnam and Ho's death and its immediate consequences.

SCENE VI: 1970 and 1971

This would cover Hanoi's revised military and diplomatic strategy, Sihanouk's ouster, subsequent events in Cambodia and their impact on the situation in South Vietnam, Lam Son 719 and its resultant impact, internal South Vietnamese politics, the pattern of profound change emerging in the countryside, Thieu's position, the handling of the Vietnamese Presidential election and its real consequences within South Vietnam (which were quite different from those alleged abroad), the revelations of the secret talks, Kissinger's visit and the U.S. opening to Peking, the burgeoning mood of detente with China and

the Soviet Union and the impact of all of these on Hanoi, the latter's tactics, the situation within South Vietnam itself, the progressive "Vietnamization" of the ground struggle and non-Vietnamization of the air war -- their military and political consequences, the impact of all of these trends and events on the post-Ho situation within the Hanoi Politburo, on the Communists' southern organization, and on both Vietnamese protagonists' assessments of their relative strengths and weaknesses.

SCENE VII: 1972 Onward

This section would cover 1972 up to whatever cutoff point was chosen for ending the history. It would treat the rationale behind Hanoi's 30 March 1972 offensive, the policy goals it was intended to further, its results and political impact, the Moscow and Peking visits, the U.S. Presidential election and the assessments (differing) by both Vietnamese protagonists of its possible import, the continuing priority debate within the Hanoi Politburo (never entirely resolved) and its interacting relationship with personal rivalries, the negotiations of August and September 1972, their surfacing by Hanoi, Washington's rejoinder and the rationale behind these gambits, Hanoi's shifting concept of the objectives that could be achieved by these negotiations, the concepts and behavior of Thieu, the actual U.S. election and lessons drawn by Vietnamese (of varying persuasions) from its results, Hanoi's hardening line, the December 1972 bombings, the Paris Agreements, their impact; both sides' perception (again, differing) of their import, potentialities and possible consequences, their aftermath and post-Paris trends up to the cutoff point.

EPILOGUE

This final section would restate the work's main themes in brief compass and sketch what they suggest regarding the outlook for the future.